

Bad Roads to Good Roads
The Great Races: 1908-09
Part One

In 1909 only seven percent of the two million miles of highways in the United States were classified as "improved." In rain and snow, most American roads became impassable. Encyclopedia.com notes:

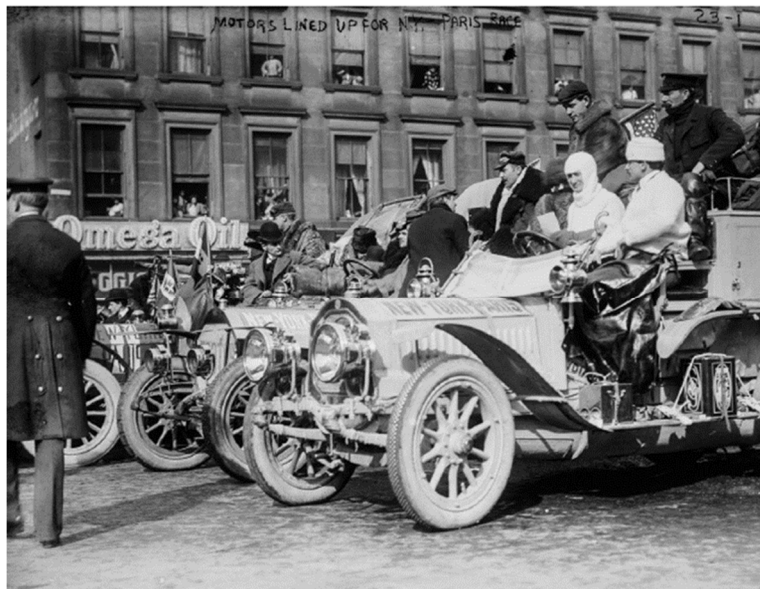
"When the Office of Public Roads Inquiries undertook the first inventory of all U.S. roads in 1904, the country had 2,151,570 miles of rural public roads, but 1,997,908 miles, or 93 percent, were dirt. Of the 153,662 miles with any kind of surfacing, only 38,622 miles were stone or macadam, while the remainder included 108,232 miles of gravel and 6,810 of shell, sand, clay, brick, or other materials. Only a few hundred miles of roads in the entire country were suitable for motor vehicles." "As motor-vehicle sales grew rapidly—exceeding 1,000 for the first time in 1899, 100,000 in 1909, and 1 million in 1916—Americans demanded and got good roads."

In 1908 and 1909 two long distance endurance automobile races with ties to Washington State helped to focus public attention on the deplorable condition of American roads. These were the 1908 New York to Paris Race and the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Race, from New York City to Seattle.

- In this Part One of this blogpost series, we'll touch briefly on the 1908 New York to Paris Race.
- In Part Two we will set the stage for the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Race itself and briefly cover the travails of the "pace car" of the Race.
- Parts Three and Four will set the stage for the 1909 Race and describe the routes and rules of the Race and the hardships faced by the drivers, with emphasis on that portion in Washington State.

1908 New York to Paris Race

On February 12, 1908, 17 men, including drivers, mechanics and journalists, shoehorned into six cars from four countries. These men lined up in the swirling snow of Times Square are beginning a nearly unthinkable feat: a race from New York to Paris, westward, in the winter. This insane endurance race is sponsored by the New York Times and the French newspaper Le Matin. The prizes: a 1,400-pound trophy and proving it could be done.





The American team was headed by Monty Roberts and George Schuster, in the Thomas Flyer. From www.sportscardigest.com.

Six cars representing four nations were at the starting line for what became a 169-day ordeal. National flags of Germany, France, Italy, and the United States flew, with the Protos representing Germany, a Züst representing Italy, three cars (Dion-Bouton, Motobloc, and Sizaire-Naudin) representing France, and a Thomas Flyer representing the United States. The Thomas Flyer is a 60-horsepower touring car just off the assembly line and much the same as it had left the factory. The same could not be said for its main threat, the Protos. That car had been specially created for the race by a team of 600 workers at the behest of Kaiser Wilhelm II.



The proposed route is across the United States, through areas with very few improved roads, and then north to Alaska (by boat) and then across the (hopefully frozen Bering Strait into Siberia. Then across Siberia to Moscow and then on to Paris. The Thomas Flyer reached San Francisco in 41 days, 8 hours, and 15 minutes — the first ever crossing of the United States by a car in winter. The car was then shipped up to Seattle and on to Valdez, Alaska. As the Americans turned north, the line of followers stretched from California to Iowa. The Züst was in Omaha, the De Dion in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the Moto-Bloc in Maple Park, Illinois, and the Protos a in Geneva, Illinois. Another French car, contending with mechanical problems, was forced to drop out.



The driver of the American Thomas Flyer car waits for the ferry in Valdez, Alaska.
Image: Britannica/Getty Images

The Thomas crew found impossible conditions in Alaska and returned to Seattle. The race was rerouted across the Pacific by steamer to Japan where the Americans made their way across to the Sea of Japan. Then it was on to Vladivostok, Siberia, by ship to begin crossing the continents of Asia and Europe. Only three of the competitors made it past Vladivostok: the Protos (Germany), the Züst (Italian), and the Flyer (American).

In Hudson, New York, the cars plowed through foot-deep snow in a single file. Schuster circled the Thomas Flyer—which had no heater or windshield—with a stick to check snow depth and put down planks for traction. The trail out of Auburn, which the New York Times described as the worst road in the United States, lived up to its reputation, with the three leading cars getting mired at Dismal Hollow in the Montezuma Swamp. The men prepared to camp for the night, but an American guide hired by the Italians came with six horses to pull the cars through.



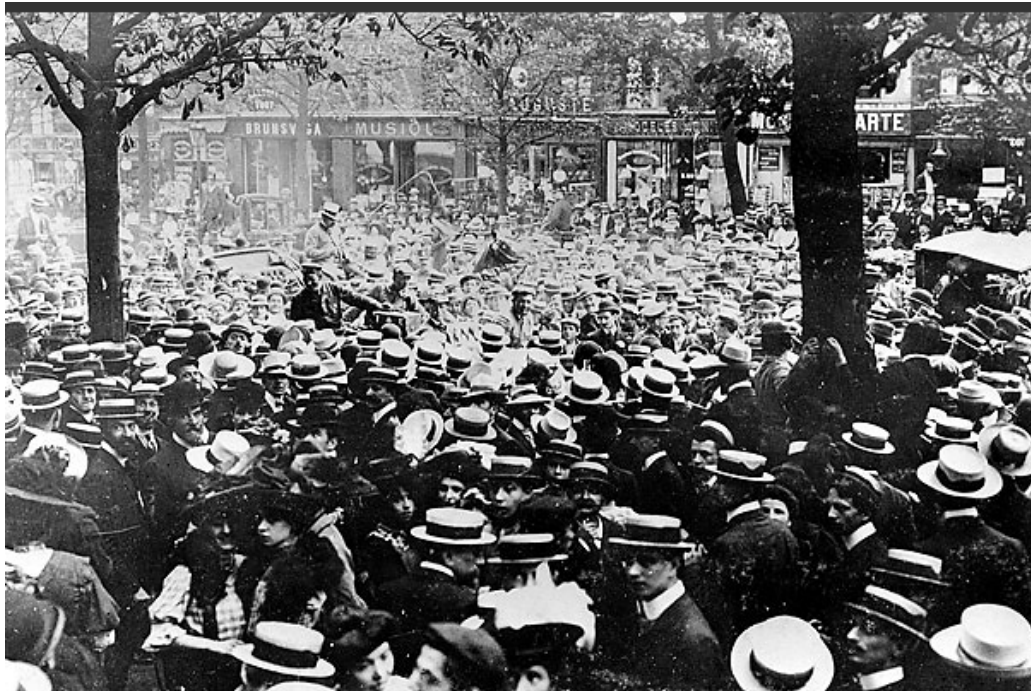
The American Flyer in Utah. | National Automobile Museum

Often, the teams resorted to straddling locomotive rails with their cars riding tie to tie on balloon tires for hundreds of miles when no roads could be found. Non-American rivals said they were at a disadvantage because the Thomas team was permitted by patriotic rail operators to drive on trolley and train tracks. In the West, the Union Pacific even scheduled the Flyer on its tracks, as if it were a train.

The plains of Siberia and Manchuria were an endless quagmire with the spring thaw making progress difficult. At several points, forward movement was often measured in feet rather than miles per hour. Only a few miles out of Vladivostok, the American team came upon the German Protos stuck in deep mud. George Schuster



carefully nudged his car past the Germans onto firmer ground a few hundred yards ahead. With him were mechanic George Miller, assistant Hans Hansen, and New York Times reporter George Macadam. When Hansen suggested they help the Germans out, the others agreed. The stunned Germans were so grateful that their driver, Lt. Hans Koeppen, uncorked a bottle of champagne he'd been saving for a victory celebration in Paris, declaring the American gesture "a gallant and comradely act." The two teams raised a glass together, reporter Macadam recorded the moment for his paper, and the subsequent photograph appeared in papers around the globe and became the most enduring image of the race.



Schuster and his crew arrived in Paris on July 30, the Flyer making its way through the lines of lighted cafes, the crowds shouting wildly: "Vive le car Americain!" They cruised toward the Place de l'Opéra, where, in front of the Café de la Paiz, a gendarme stopped the car. "You are under arrest," he declared. "You have no lights on your car." A crowd of Americans rushed from the café and tried to explain, but the officer waved them away. The law was the law: a car had to have a headlight to be on the streets of Paris at night, or the driver was to be placed under arrest. A quick-thinking man on a bicycle rode up to the car, jumped off and deposited his bike, which had a headlight, in the Flyer next to Schuster. Problem solved. The gendarme stepped aside.

Schuster enjoyed the Flyer's triumphant return to Times Square on August 17, 1908. After the accolades and parties died down, he returned to his job at the Thomas factory, where he was promised employment as long as the company was in business. Five years later, the Thomas company collapsed, and all its goods were auctioned off. Lot number 1829 was listed simply as the "Famous New York to Paris Racer." The winning Thomas Flyer is on display in Reno, Nevada, at the National Automobile Museum, alongside the trophy.

The race was of international interest with daily front page coverage by The New York Times (a cosponsor of the race with the Parisian newspaper Le Matin). The significance of the event extended far beyond the race itself. Together with the Peking to Paris race which took place the year before it established the reliability of the automobile as a dependable means of transportation, eventually taking the automobile from an amusement of the rich to a reliable and viable means of long distance transportation for the masses. It also led to the call for improved roads to be constructed in many parts of the world.

Sources

Wikipedia

Paris or Bust: The Great New York-to-Paris Auto Race of 1908, Smithsonian Magazine, March 7, 2012

Links

YouTube: The Thomas Flyer - 1908 New York to Paris Auto Race; <https://youtu.be/ffS8YDFgkTg>